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Book Review: Deconstruction in America

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Deconstruction in America

Bernard-Henri Lévy, *American Vertigo*,
(translated by Charlotte Mandell)
Random House ©2006

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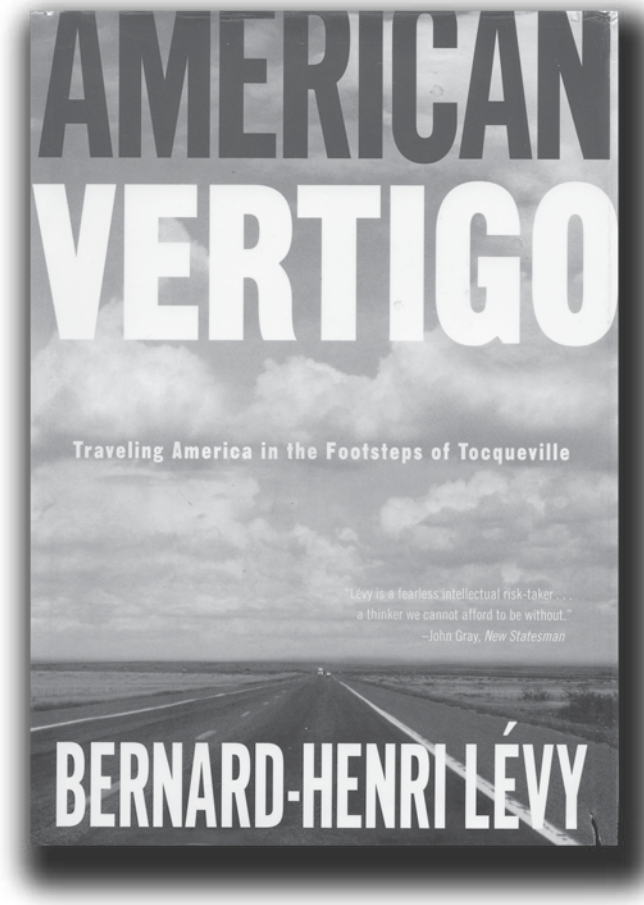

Bernard-Henri Lévy finally gets around to explaining the title of his rather petrified travelogue, *American Vertigo*, on page 238. He writes of "these myriad Americans who continued to be viewed as an elite people, sure of itself and domineering, whereas in reality no large modern nation today is as uncertain as this one, less sure of what it is becoming, less confident of the very values, that is to say, the myths, that founded it; it's a certain disorder; a disease; a wavering of points of reference and certainties; a *vertigo* once again that seizes the observer as well as the observed…" Certainly Lévy found himself seized, but then after interviewing James Ellroy, Warren Beatty, Jim Harrison, Charlie Rose, Russell Means, Sharon Stone, Woody Allen, and assorted strippers, trippers, and zippers who wouldn't find himself vertiginous? As for "the observed," in this case an American reader, difficult to say. Lévy's scattergun and dizzying prose style creates more glare than clarity. Remember that Lévy resides in a country that recently awarded the king of dizzy, Jerry Lewis, its highest honor for artistic achievement. Deano!

Lévy undertakes to repeat Alexis de Tocqueville's 1831-32 travels in the then fledgling United States to observe its prisons. What resulted from his journals was *Democracy in America* which examined the strengths and weaknesses of democratic institutions. Tocqueville observed the United States from the perspective of a post-Napoleonic Frenchman who attributed the success of American democracy to its vast landscape available for settlement and its citizens' optimism about the future; western Europe, particularly France in Tocqueville's view, found its liberal democratic impulses thwarted by the constricting influence of the past and a conservative move toward reinstituting constitutional monarchies.

In a recent *Paris Match* (April 13–19, 2006) interview, Lévy was asked why American reviewers have not spared him. Lévy responds that "Why haven't they spared me? The American press has been universally positive. But there has been a lively debate surrounding the book [*American Vertigo*] and even some resoundingly false notes as, for example, in *The New York Times*. My book, in other words, hasn't left Americans indifferent. Some have been pro, some con—a true political battle around some of my theses. On the whole, those I attack in *American Vertigo*, the America I denounce, that is to say the left and right sides of the political chessboard, have responded virulently along the lines of 'what right does he have to meddle?' But OK, that's precisely the point I'm aiming at" (my translation). But Garrison Keillor, who reviewed *American Vertigo* for *The New York Times* and must be Lévy's resoundingly false note, accuses Lévi of "tedious and original thinking" that is "short on the facts, long on conclusions," resulting in writing akin to "a student padding out a term paper." Martin Peretz uses his 'Cambridge Diarist' column in *The New Republic* (2/13/2006) to take Keillor to task for his inability to "fathom the intellectual weight of Lévy's transaction between Tocqueville and the present." Peretz finds Lévy's observations about the United States "suffused with that wrenching Tocquevillean tug between liberty and equality—the very drama of America , which is still the arbiter, for better or for worse…of the new century."

Lévy invokes Tocquevillian precedent early in *American Vertigo* when he asks rhetorically: "Isn't the author of the two volumes of *Democracy in America* the inventor, after all, of this modern form of reportage where attention to detail, the taste for personal encounters and circumstances, did not prevent—quite the contrary, made possible—faithfulness to a fixed idea?" Lévy's fixed

ideas include the lack of any clash of ideas in American politics, the debasing, if you will, of political discourse and the narrowing of this discourse to exclude discussion of possible outcomes. He terms much of what occurs in American political discourse "junk politics." He notes in the course of his numerous visits to museums his idée fixé that Americans have memorials for virtually everything and that memorials such as the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown don't so much preserve history as foster and preserve myths. He ultimately labels Americans antiquarians whose "idea is not to preserve [history] but to reconstitute a false truth and celebrate it as such." He dismisses this practice as the "triumph of kitsch." Like many before him, Lévy calls the United States—New Orleans excepted—a puritan land where in a Las Vegas lap-dancing club he tries to engage Linda in a question and answer debate about her profession and concludes by remarking on "the wretchedness of Eros in the land of the Puritans." And, in a postscript written after hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Lévy opines that "I saw—I heard—The manner in which the American nation persists in viewing itself as an immense middle class devoted to the American Way of Life, despite the obvious refutation—the very real existence of the 37 million outcasts, the victims of social exclusion."

Who has the right take on Lévy—Keillor or Peretz? Keillor would assert, I think, that Levi's conclusions outlined in the preceding paragraph are fairly obvious and even banal to anyone minimally familiar with life in the United States. Peretz would likely argue that Americans in their quest for liberty overlook the glaring inequalities with which Lévy claims hurricane Katrina has confronted them. Yet, in a strange way Lévy finds an America where a simultaneously banal and brutal equality prevails in its marginal institutions. Visiting a gated retirement community in Sun City, Arizona, he finds a "paradise laden with all the attractions of purgatory, [a] kindergarten for senior citizens where life seems to have morphed into a pathology." Some pages later, touring Louisiana's Angola prison where the gift shop sells T-shirts "printed with ANGOLA: A GATED COMMUNITY," Lévy finds in the prison's setting—"a wholesome life in the great outdoors, on this former plantation"—"a diminished life, a bloodless life, but a life all the same." Is implying the parallel between two maximum security communities a flash of intellectual insight or simply flashy? Are we, Lévy's observed, to conclude that what he observes at the outer margins of our society provides the key to what resides in the center?

Lévy's portrayal of George Bush, whom he clearly doesn't like, presents the President as a sort of political/psychological gated community. "The truth is," Lévy suggests, "that this man is something of a child. Whether he's dependent on his father, his mother, his wife, or God Almighty, he looks to me like one of those humiliated children Georges Bernanos [a French novelist] was so good at creating, showing that their hardness stemmed from their shyness and fear." And a few paragraphs later, "I see him then, quite clearly, as a provincial narcissist and a frustrated dilettante, a bad businessman, an overgrown daddy's boy whom the family manages to save from each of his semifailures." (These sentences written by a man disturbed at the paucity of ideas in American political discourse.) For Lévy the hard outside simultaneously protects and imprisons George Bush's fearful and vulnerable inside; the boy from the provinces becomes the man at the center. "How," Lévy asks in what I think must be genuine bewilderment, "did this man become a formidable machine capable of winning the most difficult competition in America…?"

The answer is, to recall James Carville's advice to Bill Clinton: "It's the economy, stupid." For Lévy Americans display their economic habits in their shopping whose quintessence he finds in Minneapolis' Mall of America. The Mall is "an adventure" Lévy tells us—not for him but for the shoppers—"an experience in and of itself." "What," he asks—again rather rhetorically—"do we learn about American civilization from this mausoleum of merchandise, this funereal accumulation of false goods and nondesires in this end-of-the-world setting?" Lévy sees in the faces of the Mall shoppers "the easily led, almost animal-like face Alexandre Kojève [a French philosopher] said would be the face of humanity at the arrival…of the end of history." The Mall of America represents in microcosm for Lévy the United States as an economic gated community—or, if you're one of Lévy's mall walkers, a gaited community—whose middle American shoppers content themselves with childlike and ephemeral pleasures. Lévy reduces Americans to banality and—in what he sees as our innocence—brutality.

Still, France is not without shopping malls, quite large ones like the one I had occasion to visit in St. Laurent du Var just outside Nice. The French apparently use their malls for recreational walking as well as shopping, accompanied quite frequently by their dogs. The signs above the spacious entrance to the supermarket that occupied an entire section of the mall read "pas de chien dans le marché" The French, I've noted on my visits, tend to view any sign prohibiting something as an affront, so dogs accompanied their owners into the market. I began to wonder whether the sign above the market entrance shouldn't perhaps have read "don't purchase items off the lower shelves." But, I'm pretty sure a French person would have informed me, had I made the suggestion, that I lacked a clear understanding of the cultural signs.

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